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Our Opinions

Sen. Levin and SALT II

A letter from Sen. Carl Levin, which appeared in The Detroit News on Tuesday, took issue with our Nov. 25 editorial, entitled "SALT II, Phase II."

The editorial argued against ratification of the treaty because the Soviets would gain strategic advantages from it and because it would be nearly impossible to verify Soviet compliance.

One of the most fearful weaknesses of this arms agreement is that while it allows each side 820 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) armed with multiple warheads, in reality it accedes to Soviet superiority because America cannot possibly build more than 550 of the ICBM's by 1985, and the Soviet Union is positioned to build all 820.

Sen. Levin dismisses this point casually, saying the United States decided long ago not to build more than 550 ICBM's and that this decision has nothing whatever to do with SALT II. What he does not explain is why Washington should concede this considerable advantage to the USSR. Why does the agreement not restrict the USSR to 550, to



establish "equivalency"? These numbers, we believe, have everything to do with SALT II.

Sen. Levin states that the United States has about 9,200 warheads, the Soviet Union about 5,000. Both sides are expected to "deploy" 10,000 to 12,000 warheads by 1985. Presumably, the senator expects his constituents to be reassured by these estimates.

But this argument once again ignores the basic question of firepower. American land-based missile silos use the "hot-launch" tech-

be cooled and cleaned before reuse. Soviet missilemen use the "cold-launch" technique. The missile is lofted by compressed air and the engines are ignited above the silo. The silo is immediately reusable.

The USSR has rapid-fire capability. America does not. The Soviets can launch up to 10 warheads on some missiles. The United States is limited to three. These disparities may have a technical ring, but they are real and they are dangerous.

Sen. Levin writes of the triad — land-based missiles, submarine-based missiles, and heavy bombers — and says no matter what, America will have plenty of firepower to answer any first strike.

Not so. Sometime in the 1980's, the USSR will have a first-strike force capable of destroying 90 percent of America's land-based ICBM's, half the submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's), and 60 percent of the B52 bombers. To so cripple America's strategic capacity, the Soviet Union would require only one-fifth to one-third of its missiles. Would a president of the United States risk incineration of the nation's cities by ordering a weak retaliatory strike? This question is central. The senator has not answered it.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner and Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have assured Sen. Levin and the nation that Soviet compliance with the treaty can be verified. Their flat assertions are not enriched, however, with supporting information.

Compliance is to be verified primarily by surveillance satellites. The USSR has demonstrated an ability to blind or destroy such satellites. Further, there are too many uncounted weapons that can be quietly and quickly upgraded to intercontinental status. (How do you detect and count the third-stage rockets that convert intermediate missiles into ICBM's or count the bombs or cruise missiles hidden in the bays and hangars of the Backfire bombers that can, with midair refueling, attack this country?)

Sen. Levin is piqued by our suggestion that no conscientious senator would vote for such an agreement. Perhaps he draws no distinction between a senator who means well and